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CROSS COUNTRY

Ice Cream Hangover

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STOWE, Vt. -- I've always prided myself on conscientiously avoiding funding anti-free-market liberal causes in America, so you won't ever catch me pouring Newman's Own oil-and-vinegar dressing on my salad. But I confess to an addiction to Ben & Jerry's Chunky Monkey and the greatest flavor ever invented in ice-creamdom, Coffee Heath Bar Crunch. I draw the line, however, at the now-retired Rainforest Crunch. The name itself is nauseating. Eating a rain forest?

So this weekend, while in Vermont to speak at the Freedom Fest sponsored by the Ethan Allen Institute, a conservative state think tank (150 people showed up -- more freedom-lovers than I would have thought resided in the blue state that gave us Howard Dean and Congress's only avowed socialist, Bernie Sanders), I paid a visit to the world-famous Ben & Jerry's ice-cream factory.


To be in Vermont and not visit this landmark would be as unforgivable as visiting Rome and not going to the Colosseum. So I slapped down three bucks and waited in the gift shop where a pint of ice cream costs \$3.99 -- which to me borders on price-gouging. (One of the supreme ironies of this socially conscious firm is that it is one of the best capitalists you'll ever come across.)

The tour itself is a 30-minute propaganda campaign explaining why the company's founders, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, deserve the Nobel Peace Prize for their unwavering commitment to the environment and economic justice.

Meanwhile, their factory is a monument to the efficiencies of capitalism and technological progress: Several dozen giant computer-operated machines churn out hundreds of thousands of cartons a day. I half expect the massive energy-gulping freezers to be solar-paneled or powered by green-friendly windmills, but no, they use lots and lots of conventional electricity. It turns out that if you want really good ice cream, you just have to tolerate a little more global warming. That's a trade-off that I personally am willing to make.

Most of my fellow tourists are a bit on the chubby side, and a few start wheezing as we climb the half-flight of stairs to the observation area. These folks need another scoop of Cherry Garcia like a hole in the head. Although this company touts its "wholesome and natural ingredients mixed with euphoric concoctions," the truth is that Ben & Jerry's ice cream mostly contains two hazardous ingredients: fatty cream and sugar.

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Herein lies a second irony: This product is probably about as good for your health as a pack of Camel cigarettes -- and at least cigarettes carry the Surgeon General's warning labels. At Ben & Jerry's, the saying goes "if you can't eat a whole pint ... in one sitting, you aren't really trying." But if you do, you might as well be injecting your arteries with Elmer's glue. And they have no qualms about marketing this dangerous product to children. If you want to know the definition of a liberal's dilemma, just wait till the trial lawyers slap Ben & Jerry's with a billion-dollar lawsuit.

Our guide is almost apologetic when he tells us that back in 2000 our lovable heroes got filthy rich by selling out to corporate food giant Unilever. But never fear: In the tour video, the new, aptly named CEO, Walt Freese, assures us that "our commitment to social and economic justice and the environment is as important to us as profitability. It's our heritage." I nearly have to wipe away tears streaming down my cheeks.

It is fortuitous that I am here the very week Ben & Jerry's announced that, for the first time in 10 years, it will get back to "leading with its values" by spending \$5 million on a social awareness TV ad campaign. More than one analyst has wondered aloud whether this is just a slick Madison Avenue advertising gimmick to hike profits. After all, corporate responsibility has become the chic new marketing theme for Fortune 500 companies like British Petroleum, Starbucks and even GE. But Mr. Freese assures us that "this isn't a short-term strategy to drive up sales. These are issues that are important for our society to address."

And just what are those issues? Here our earnest tour guide raises his chin a bit and proudly declares that the first ads are dedicated to saving the family farm. When I burst out laughing, 22 sets of angry eyes glared at me. For the past 100 years, as the productivity of the American farmer has surged to unprecedented heights, the number of Americans working in agriculture to feed the world has fallen from 35 workers per 100 to two.

This is called progress. What is Ben & Jerry's proposed solution, anyway? To turn back the clock and abolish the tractor? Many Americans seem to be under the illusion that the small family farmer has lived a carefree idyllic lifestyle. In truth, this livelihood has traditionally involved backbreaking toil, work-days that last from sun-up to sundown, and monotony -- which is why sons and daughters have been fleeing the farm for five generations. The only people who actually want to save small farms are people who've never worked on a farm.

The Ben & Jerry's ads moan that the corporatization of farming is a horrid trend. I couldn't help asking our tour guide during the Q-&-A why, if corporatization of farming is such a bad thing, that isn't also true of the corporatization of ice cream. Those same 22 pairs of eyes glare back at me.

It's hard to feel sorry for the allegedly aggrieved farmers who have "lost their land" to corporate greed. In Northern Virginia, where I live (and in many other areas), the farmers have sold their acreage for about 20 times what they paid and now they own million-dollar bungalows in Palm Beach, while the rest of us get to shop at glorious-though-crowded strip malls. It's a win-win.

At the end of the tour -- which I highly recommend for the free scoops along the way -- it's a relief to know that of all the dimwitted, touchy-feely, left-wing social causes Ben & Jerry's could waste \$5 million on, this one will probably do society and our beloved capitalistic system the least damage. So as a lover of freedom, I can, in good conscience, shell out \$4 a pint for Coffee Heath Bar Crunch, eat it out of the carton in one sitting -- my arteries be damned -- and still feel good about myself in the morning.

Mr. Moore is a member of The Wall Street Journal's editorial board.

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